

## District Court in Puerto Rico gets a high five for technology

By MANUEL SELLES

HATO REY, Puerto Rico – It was a major financial challenge for Frances Rios de Morán, Clerk of the U.S. District Court of Puerto Rico, to equip the courtrooms of the federal courthouse here with state-of-the-art evidence-presentation systems. Funding assistance from the Administrative Office was limited to one courtroom per district, and even these monies were not sufficient to cover both the infrastructure and equipment needs. Judge Carmen C. Cerezo, immediate past chief of the court, initiated the effort to upgrade the courtrooms with the evidence-presentation technology, and her successor, Chief Judge Hector M. Laffitte, also gave his full support for the plan and committed the funds to fulfill the project. Thus, the court is justifiably proud of its success in having achieved its technology goals in five of the courtrooms and now having distinguished itself as one of the most technologically advanced within the federal judiciary.

The systems include full support for laptop-generated multimedia presentations, with VGA-quality displays using flat-panel monitors located throughout the courtroom, and TV monitors for public viewing. The system also provides for touch/flat-panel screens for witness or attorney hand-annotation of the digital evidence. The evidence and the annotations can be printed and the output admitted as evidence. More common methods of evidence presentation are also integrated in the system, such as audio and video cassette players and digital-camera projection of paper documents as well as objects, x-rays, negatives and transparencies.

The audio and video integration provides for audio recording of the proceedings, and real-time technology enables the judge or attorneys to view the transcripts of the proceedings as they are entered by the court reporter. Other innovative features include teleconferencing, Spanish translation via infrared emitters to wireless headsets, sidebar recording and remote listening for the court reporter.

In the area of sound technology, all manual and knob controls have been transferred to touch-screen menus, which allow control of the volume of the speakers and the gain on individual microphones and also activate sidebar jury-box music or white noise. The menu screen also allows the judge or the courtroom deputy the control of evidence displayed; other features facilitate the control of the technology via icons. The evidence system will be maintainable, which will facilitate troubleshooting and software upgrades.

The courtrooms of the magistrate judges have also been upgraded, with the digital recording of proceedings. These recordings are automatically archived into the court's local area network and can be easily retrieved from that network by the magistrate judge or staff at a later time. CD-ROM copies can be made on demand and provided to outside services for transcript creation as needed.

Finally, these courtrooms now have videoconferencing capabilities and necessary connections. The video conference system is a roll-about system and can be transported to any of the five courtrooms as needed. All courtrooms will share the ISDN lines required, through a hub system, thereby greatly reducing the monthly costs of the line.

*Manuel Sellés is administrator of procurement management and court technology in the U.S. District Court for Puerto Rico.*